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ABSTRACT

Counselors who work with children and adolescents are well aware of the problems, frustrations, and feelings of hopelessness that these youngsters often bring to the counseling session. However, counselors may be less aware of what is happening in society-at-large. The 1980s and early 1990s have been characterized by high unemployment. It is clear that in the present economy women need to work. An increasing number of families are headed by one parent. After divorce it is unfortunate that as children and adolescents adjust to new schools and new friends in less favorable environments, the possibilities exist for increased involvement in substance use and/or sexual activity. The combined effect of an increased divorce rate and an increased rate of out-of-wedlock child bearing means that almost one-fourth of all children in the United States lived with only one parent in the late 1980s. The single most pervasive stressor in the lives of women and children is poverty. Non-familial caregiving has become commonplace and the need for quality child care is projected to increase. It is clear that the family is reeling from the combined effects of a multitude of stressors. It seems imperative that counselors must be able to identify social factors which contribute to problems faced by today's youth and to advocate preventive measures to ensure optimal development of all people. (ABL)

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# Family Stress/Children In Conflict:

# Some Contributing Social Factors

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Running Head: FAMILY STRESS

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Abstract

Family Stress/Children In Conflict:
Some Contributing Social Factors

In this paper, we review recent research literature in an attempt to highlight social factors which appear to be primary contributors to problems faced by today's youth. If the battle to provide a safe and productive environment for our children and adolescents is to be won, a concerted effort involving children, parents, schools, businesses, and government seems critical.

## Family Stress/Children In Conflict: Some Contributing Social Factors

Counselors and psychologists who work with children and adolescents are well aware of the common problems, frustrations, and feelings of hopelessness that these youngsters often bring to the counseling session. However, counselors may be less aware of what is happening in society-at-large at any given time and the resultant potential impact upon the family. In this paper, we review recent research literature in an attempt to highlight social factors which appear to be primary contributors to problems faced by today's youth.

### Employment/Unemployment

The 1980s and early 1990s have been characterized by high unemployment, and many who have lost jobs are parents. In 1982, unemployment reached its highest level since the Depression of the 1930s (Flaim & Sehgal, 1985). Between the years 1981 and 1986, 10.8 million Americans lost their jobs because of lack of work, and 30% of those that did find work again did so earning 20% or more below their previous salary (Horvath, 1987). In 1985, only one in three full-time jobs could keep a family of four above the poverty line (Reischauer, 1987). Even while the argument rages regarding whether or not the current recession is about to end, thousands of workers suddenly find themselves with no, or at best inadequate, income to meet basic necessities. Perhaps this dilemma has only begun for many families in the U.S.

The work place is usually far removed from the modern child's immediate life. However, the economic stressors affecting out-of-work parents are introduced into the child's environment through changes in the parents' behavior. Support for this observation is drawn from studies done on families whose economic life was negatively impacted by the depression. Fathers who had major financial setbacks

became more tense, irritable, and explosive, which in turn decreased their ability to parent effectively (McLoyd, 1989). In general, unemployed men are more depressed, anxious, and hostile than men with jobs. They also tend to drink more, have more somatic problems, and are at higher risk of mental disorders and suicide (Kasl & Cobb, 1979; Liem, 1981). That these factors are the result of job loss and not part of the reason for the loss has been demonstrated by other research (Dew, Bromet, & Schulberg, 1987). However, fathers are only half the parenting dyad. Information available on the economic situation for women in our society is even more grim.

The Department of Labor projects that by 1995 approximately two-thirds of all new labor force entrants will be female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1986). While the traditional family appears to be changing, so too does the traditional role of homemaker for women. Matthews and Rodin (1989) reported that, of women aged 25 to 54, 72.3% (37.1 million) were in the work force. Since 1975, the rate of married women who work has increased from 44.4% to 54.6% in 1986. Among married women, those with children have shown the greatest increase in entering the work force. In 1986 54% of married women with a child under the age of six worked, compared to 30% in 1970. Fifty-eight percent of children (34 million) under the age of 18 have working mothers (Matthews & Rodin, 1989). Recent projections indicate that this trend is here to stay.

## Feminization of the Work Force

It is clear that in our present economy, women need to work. By 1980, America's poor were predominantly female. As with their male counterparts, women who were displaced workers were often forced to accept lower paying jobs when they returned to work. Seventy percent of all new private-sector jobs created between 1973 and 1980 were "women's jobs" (i.e., fast foods, data processing, business services, health care)

with the result being a "feminization" of the work force, in occupations that are poorly paid and lack opportunity for advancement. As an illustration of the eroding status of female employees, it is important to note that in 1971, only 4% of the nation's lawyers and only 9% of physicians were women. In 1981 women accounted for 14% of all lawyers and 22% of all physicians. Regardless of these inroads, the average woman's earnings relative to men's earnings decreased from 60% to 59%, which is evidence of the deterioration of the economic status of women (Ehrenreich & Piven, 1984).

Of employed women in 1987, 76.2% worked full-time, and 18.6% worked part-time (Matthews & Rodin, 1989). Although part-time work allows for women to care for their children and to contribute to the family's income, it is an economic dead-end. It pays little, leads nowhere, and provides almost no fringe benefits. Some of these women pursue work outside the home to supplement their husbands' wages because of economic necessity; others must do so because they are single parents.

## Divorce

An increasing number of families are headed by one parent. The latest annual reports show almost one divorce for every two marriages since the 1970s (Silverstein, 1991; Wetzel, 1990). Based on these patterns, it is expected that 60% of all children born in the United States will live for an extended period of time in a single parent household (Stipek & McCroskey, 1989; Wetzel, 1990). The wife is typically the custodial parent following divorce, and her income is often drastically reduced. Hutchinson and Spangler-Hirsch (1989) note that "While divorce may signal an end to or impasse in inter-parental conflict and battling, a new battle emerges and perhaps is sustained indefinitely as the mother struggles to survive economically" (p. 12). Therefore, the reality of divorce often necessitates changes in schools, neighborhoods, and peers. Church and/or other affiliated connections may be

disrupted, altered, or discontinued. Schlesinger (1982), for instance, found that 40% of children who experienced divorce had moved to new neighborhoods. Such moves necessitate potentially radical adjustments for all family members and are often to neighborhoods less conducive to child rearing. Unfortunately, as children and adolescents adjust to new schools and new friends in less favorable environments, the possibilities exist for increased involvement in substance use and/or sexual activity.

## Substance Abuse

Substance abuse by children creates additional stressors for family members. Newcomb and Bentler (1989) report that 92% of high school seniors have some experience with alcohol, with 5% reporting daily drinking and 37.5% reporting at least one heavy drinking incident. Twenty percent of high school seniors report daily cigarette smoking, and 24% report having smoked marijuana. These authors also report that 13% of third graders in an Oklahoma survey reported using smokeless tobacco, and that a child's first drink of alcohol occurs around age 12 for boys and slightly later for girls.

As further evidence of the prevalence of substance use among today's youth, Deffenbaugh, Hutchinson, & Blankschen (in press) designed a study to (1) assess the usage of substances by 2,125 youth (grades 4-12) in rural Indiana and to (2) explore the differences between students' reported use of substances and parents' perceptions of students' use. These researchers note that "While parents believe that some of the students in their child's school use drugs, they seriously underestimated the number of students in their child's grade who were using various substances. In addition, almost no parents of elementary or junior high school students believed that their own child used any drug" (p. 17).

## Teen Pregnancy

Out-of-wedlock births accounted for over 20% of all births in 1985, and almost one third of these births were to teenage mothers (Stipek & McCroskey, 1989). Although teen pregnancy has been higher, for example in the 1960s, it is now considered more of a problem because many of the resulting births occur outside of marriage. In 1950 15% of the children were born to teens who were not married; today the figure is over 50%. The United States' now has the dubious honor of having the highest incidence of teenage pregnancy of all industrialized countries. Current estimates of teenage pregnancy in this country exceeds one million each year, with 30,000 under the age of 15 and 80% not married while pregnant (Davis, 1989). The combined effect of an increased divorce rate and an increased rate of out-of-wedlock child bearing means that almost one-fourth (15.3 million) of all children in the United States lived with only one parent in the late 1980s. That compares with 5.8 million in 1960 and 8.2 million in 1970. Almost 9 out of 10 children living with only one parent live with their mothers who often have below average incomes. The poverty rate for married-couple families with children in 1988 was 7.2%, but the rate for families maintained by single women was an alarming 44.7% (Wetzel, 1990).

## Women , Children, and Poverty

The single most pervasive stressor in the lives of women and children is poverty. In 1979, 34.6% of the total number of female headed families (3.3 million) received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); a similar number were on Medicaid; and 2.6 million were enrolled in the food stamp program (Ehrenreich & Piven, 1984). For many families, poverty begins when the marriage ends. In 1983, the percentage of female-headed households with children living in poverty was 22%, while the percentage of the general population living in poverty was 15.3% (Sidel, 1986). Child

support payments are a negligible source of income for these families. Many divorced fathers (40%) pay nothing, and those who do contribute pay less than $2,l00 a year on average (Ehrenreich & Piven, 1984). Because single parent families, 90% of which are headed by women, have an elevated risk of becoming poor, the people at greatest risk for poverty are children. Currently, it is estimated that twenty percent of the children living in the United States are living in poverty. The poverty gap between children and adults has continued to increase significantly since the early 1970s, and this trend has been linked with a higher risk of low educational achievement, frequent involvement with the criminal justice system, and single-parenting. These risks, in turn, are associated with unsuccessful work-life patterns (Wetzel, 1990).

Poverty means, at its most elemental level, that money will not be available for necessities. Recent statistics from the World Health Organization indicate that 40% to 60% of the world's children suffer from some form of malnutrition. A large number of children in the United States can be included in this figure, although the exact number is still unknown (Lozoff, 1989). Recent research conducted on children suffering from severe protein-energy undernutrition during their first year of life were shown to eventually catch-up with their age mates in physical growth. However, they continued to manifest behavioral and intellectual deficits. Children who had suffered from undernutrition were shown to have a fourfold increase in symptoms of attention deficit disorder (impaired attention, poor memory and school performance, and easy distractibility). In fact, 60% of the children who were undernourished were diagnosed as suffering from attention deficit disorder, and symptoms such as distractibility, and attention problems continued when they were retested at age 18 (Galler, 1984).

## Non-familial Care-giving

Given the number of working women with children and the number of single

parent households headed by women, non-familial care-giving has become commonplace, and the need for quality child-care is projected to increase (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989). This creates serious implications for parenting. Finding suitable child care arrangements are difficult and create added problems for families with working parents. As a result, there is an intense debate as to the possible negative side effects of the mother's employment on her child's development, especially during infancy.

Our research as counselors has focused almost entirely on the possible negative consequences of maternal employment and non-familial daycare, ignoring the possibility of devastating consequences from a lack of social support for parents attempting to balance the demands of work and family. Since mothers of young children continue to enter the work force in increasing numbers, the pressing issue is not simply to identify the negative effects of childcare but rather to identify changes needed for potential enhancement of the positive development of children. Issues of flexible work hours, leave for new parents and parents with ill children, and childcare assistance must be debated and resolved. Working parents, already under stress from their dual careers, develop increased stress simply by living in a society that is not supportive of their special needs (Kamerman, 1980).

## Stress

Lowery and Settle (1985) identified stress as a factor in the development of dysfunctional behaviors in children whose parents were undergoing, or who had undergone, stressful experiences. A culmination of a number of stressful experiences occurring within a relatively short span of time could overwhelm a child's ability to maintain his/her personal integrity. Lowery and Settle found that younger children seemed to fare worse than older children and that boys tended to do worse than girls.

Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, and Anderson (1989) found evidence of the cumulative effects of stress for children undergoing parental divorce. They noted, for instance, that the negative effects on boys tended to be associated with living in a female head-of-household situation and that, while immediate maladaptive behavior in girls tended to disappear after two to three years, problem behaviors did reemerge in adolescence in the form of precocious sexual behavior.

Stress has been clearly identified as a precipitant of emotional dysfunction by Sandler & Block (1979). These authors found that elementary school children, identified by parents and instructors as having adjustment problems, had experienced more stressful events during the preceding year than a matched control group. The authors also noted that social support, or the feeling that one was cared for, was a moderator of the effects of stress.

It is clear that the family as an institution is reeling from the combined effects of a multitude of stressors. As Silverstein (1991) notes, these dramatic social changes require supports for families at a social level. Whether we agree with her call for psychological researchers to abandon trying to link an absent mother with negative consequences or not, there is merit in her suggestion that we instead investigate the results of a society that refuses to supply affordable, government-subsidized, high-quality programs. According to Silverstein, the U.S. remains the only one of 756 industrialized nations not having a government-sponsored family policy that provides some form of paid maternity benefits, parental leave, and/or subsidized child care. In addition to the government's inaction, the business world has denied the needs of men and women who work and also raise a family.

Societies can be likened to families. In a healthy family, the needs of the most vulnerable and needy members are given increased emphasis. Children and families

are our social family's most vulnerable component, and we must begin to respond more effectively to their needs. There is a need for our society to act more responsibly to those entrusted to our care. In short, we must move from a dysfunctional family model toward a healthy, functional model.

## The Rights of the Child

A step toward realizing a healthier model can be taken by recognizing the obligations that families, societies, and governments have toward children. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted on November 20, 1989. When signed and ratified by the executive and legislative branches of a country, that country becomes bound by the provisions of that convention. So far, eighty countries have complied (Ouchi, 1991). The United States, along with such countries as South Africa, Iran, and Iraq have chosen neither to sign nor to ratify this convention. The general tenets of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulate that:

--Children have the right to adequate food, housing, health care and social support.

--Children have the right to safety and protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

--Children have the right to responsible participation in society, free from discrimination.

## Summary

It seems imparative that counselors, as allies of children and families, must be able to identify social factors which contribute to problems faced by today's youth and to advocate preventive measures to ensure optimal development of all people. We must insist upon the signing of the Convention of the Rights of Children by President

George Bush and the ratification of the measure by the United States Senate. Hopefully, counselors will also press for their state legislatures to utilize the convention's principles in determining the course of local government.

As counselors, we have an obligation to make the implicit explicit in our work with our clients. We have no less an obligation to our society. We can become stronger advocates for children by understanding and speaking out on the needs of children and families and by encouraging the adoption of these principles. If the battle to provide a safe and productive environment for our children and adolescents is to be won, a concerted effort involving children, parents, schools, businesses, and government seems critical. The question to ask is not "Who will pay?" or "Who will be eligible?" but rather "Will we be successful?"

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